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Sheep Rock and Vischer Burn Protection Electric Fence
Environmental Assessment
EA # OR – 030 – 03 – 0010

BLM Office: Vale District, Malheur Resource Area

Proposed Action: Construct several temporary small gap fences in Black Butte Allotment, and McEwen Allotment to protect pastures from grazing.

Applicant: BLM Grazing Permittees

Conformance with applicable land use plan

This proposed action is subject to the following land use plans:
Northern Malheur Management Framework Plan (MFP)
Dated March 14, 1983
Southern Malheur Rangeland Summary (RPS) 1984

These plans have been reviewed to determine if the purposed action conforms with the land use plan's terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5

Background

Two lightning caused fires originated on public lands. The first fire (#N260) occurred in Black Butte Allotment in T23S, R37E, sec. 11 during the evening of July 20, 2002. It burned a total of 884 acres of which, approximately 800 acres are public domain and 84 acres are private acres. Containment was achieved at 2200 on July 23, 2002. A dozer, one grader, a number of engines, one helicopter, a water tender, one hot shot land crew and many air tankers were used during suppression activities.

The second fire N276 occurred in McEwen Allotment in T. 25S, R. 38E, sec 7 on August 28, 2002. The fire was controlled on August 29, 2002 after burning 958 acres of public domain. Similar resources were used for fire suppression on #N276.

Fire number N260 occurred only in the Sheep Rock pasture of the Black Butte Allotment. The majority of the burned area for N276 is within Hickey Pasture of McEwen Allotment, and approximately one quarter of the fire burned in the Vischer Pasture in the McEwen Allotment.

Most of the areas burned were dominated by native sagebrush, (*Juniper occidentalis*) bitterbrush/bunchgrass vegetation communities and small pockets of western juniper. Native communities contained Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentate ssp. wyomingensis*), mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentate ssp. vaseyana*), bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentate*), rabbitbrush (*Ericamera sp.*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudorogneria spicata*), Thurber's needlegrass (*Stipa thurberiana*), and Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa*

secunda). Scotch thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*), an aggressive biennial, dominates small acreage at a number of locations in and adjacent to the fire boundary. Scotch thistle is also present as a minor component throughout the burned area. Sagebrush steppe vegetation communities provide year-long or winter habitat for a number of wildlife species including big game animals, upland game species, and other sagebrush dependent species.

Need For Proposed Action

The purpose of the temporary electric fences is to exclude cattle use from the burned area for at least two growing seasons or until the vegetation has recovered sufficiently to allow grazing. These temporary electric fences will also allow cattle grazing to occur in the remainder of the pastures that have not burned.

Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

- A. Alternative I: Proposed action is to build four temporary fences ranging in size from ½ mile to one mile in length, along the boundaries of the burned areas. Existing trails would be used for access. Materials would be transported to the site by ATV. No new road construction or blading of the fence line would be allowed.

The purposed project would be constructed prior to cattle turnout to exclude livestock grazing from fire impacted vegetation communities. The burned areas would be closed to livestock grazing through July 15, 2004, or until vegetation monitoring indicates that desired residual perennial vegetation has recovered to levels that are adequate to support and protect upland function.

Monitoring of the burned area would consist of livestock use supervision and vegetation monitoring.

- B. Alternative II: The temporary electric fences would not be constructed and livestock would be excluded from the entire pastures for two grazing seasons.

No Action

Revegetation of the burned area would be allowed to occur from seed and plant material which remains on site and in the soil. Livestock grazing would not be excluded from Sheep Rock Pasture, Vischer Pasture and Hickey Pasture.

No monitoring of the burn area would be completed beyond that scheduled prior to the fire.

Affected Environment

A. Vegetation

Native shrub steppe occurs in both burned areas. The vegetation associated with these communities consist of Wyoming big sagebrush, mountain big sagebrush, bitterbrush,

rabbitbrush, bluebunch wheatgrass, Thurber's needlegrass, Sandberg bluegrass and pockets of western juniper prior to the fire.

B. Livestock Grazing

The burn area for Sheep Rock fire N#260 burned mostly in the Sheep Rock Pasture and a few acres were burned in Water Gulch Pasture of the Black Butte Allotment (00304) Sheep Rock Pasture 390 acres of public domain. The area burned during the Sheep Rock Fire (N260) consumed vegetation in approximately 22% of the Sheep Rock Pasture, and approximately 2% of the Water Gulch Pasture.

The permittees are authorized to graze livestock in Black Butte Allotment, in their grazing rotation. Active AUMs within the Black Butte Allotment is 5,779 AUMs.

The second fire (N276) burned in both Hickey Pasture and Vischer Pasture in the McEwen Allotment. Hickey pasture has 13,194 acres, Vischer has 14,141 acres of BLM land. Both pastures are located in McEwen Allotment (20603) and have only one permittee with a current grazing preference of 6011 active AUMs.

6. Wildlife

Sagebrush obligate birds and mule deer are identified as the key management species of importance. The primary season of wildlife occupancy are summer and fall (June-November). Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*) are not present within the project area. Other wildlife values include pronghorn, chukar, neotropical song birds, and small mammals.

7. Threatened or Endangered Species.

No species of plant or wildlife in the proposed project area are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

8. Recreational and Visual Resources.

Dispersed outdoor recreation in the proposed area consists primarily of hunting and fishing. Some dispersed sightseeing and day hiking may occur. Other opportunities include backpacking, camping, photography, bird watching, and nature study.

The Sheep Rock fire N#260 is within a visual resource management (VRM) class II inventory area. The Vischer Creek fire N#276 is within a VRM class IV area. The management objectives of VRM class II is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to landscape characteristics should be low. Management activities may be seen but should not attract the attention of a casual observer. Any change must conform to the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

The management objectives of VRM class IV is to provide for management activities that requires major modification of the landscape. These management activities may dominate the view and become the focus of viewer attention. However, every effort should be made to minimizing disturbance, and designing the project by carefully locating activities,

minimizing disturbance, and designing the project to conform to the characteristic landscape.

9. Cultural Resources.

A survey for cultural resources has been conducted within the project location and no cultural resources were found.

Prehistoric and historic use of the area has been documented by the presence of artifacts and through oral histories. Prehistoric sites are mainly lithic scatters and camp sites associated with springs and water sources. Native American use of the area would have been associated with the seasonal round as family groups followed the resources from lower elevations in the spring to higher elevations in summer. This area is dotted with springs that would have been utilized by big game species, upland game species and humans.

10. Other Mandatory Elements

The following mandatory elements are either not present or would not be affected by the proposed action or alternatives.

<u>Critical Elements</u>	<u>Affected</u>	
	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Air quality		X
Ares of Critical Environmental Concerns		X
Prime and Unique Farmlands		X
Floodplains		X
Native American Religious Concerns		X
Threatened and Endangered Species		X
Hazardous and Solid Waste		X
Ground Water Quality		X
Surface Water Quality		X
Wetlands and Riparian Zones		X
Wild and Scenic Rivers		X
Wilderness/Wilderness Study Area		X
Invasive and Nonnative Species		X
Environmental Justice		X
Adverse Energy Impact		X

Environmental Consequence.

A. Alternative I: Proposed Action

1. Vegetation

The impact of excluding livestock from the burn area is expected to increase the success of key species recovery following the fire. Exclusion would allow recovery

of vigor and health of existing vegetation. Building the fence is not expected to cause any damage to the existing vegetation. No scalping or blading would be done to clear vegetation in order to install the temporary electric fence. The unburned vegetation would be grazed at normal utilization levels for these pastures. No long term impacts to vegetation are expected from the temporary fence and that any impacts resulting from livestock walking the fence and trampling vegetation would be substantially unnoticeable within two years following fence removal.

2. Soil and Water Resources

There are no expected impacts to the soil or to water resources from the proposed action over what has occurred from utilization of the pasture in preceding years.

3. Air Quality.

Air quality would not be affected.

4. Noxious Weeds

No noxious weeds are known to exist in the area. There would be very little ground disturbance while installing the temporary electric fence.

5. Livestock Grazing

Implementation of the project would provide forage for the rest of the pasture. Once the upland utilization rate reaches a maximum of 50%, the cattle would be removed from the pasture.

6. Wildlife

The fence construction phase of the project would result in big game and other species temporarily vacating the area. These effects are considered to be short term and insignificant.

New temporary fence construction may be expected to potentially cause some additional wildlife collisions, mortalities and or injuries. Flagging would be expected to reduce the potential for these kinds of adverse impacts to big game.

7. Threatened or Endangered Species

Threatened or endangered wildlife and plant species are not known or suspected to exist at these site locations. The temporary electric fence would not contribute to the need to list any species.

8. Recreation and Visual Resources

The electric fence construction would not impact recreationists or access routes. Visual impacts from the completed fence would be minimal, consisting of relatively low-lying hard-to-spot wire post. The management objectives of VRM Class II and Class IV would be met.

9. Cultural Resources

Prehistoric sites have been documented in this area through previous cultural resource surveys. The temporary fences parallel one road and cross the slope of

several ridges would have minimal to no impact on the cultural resources in the area.

B. Alternative II:

Under this alternative, the temporary electric fences would not be constructed and livestock would be excluded from the entire pastures for at least two grazing seasons.

1. Vegetation

The effects to vegetation would be consistent with the proposed action in the burned area. The vegetation outside the burned area would receive at least two growing seasons of rest.

2. Soils

Soils would remain unchanged

3. Air Quality

Air quality is not affected

4. Noxious Weeds

No noxious weeds would be introduced in these pastures.

5. Livestock Grazing

The permittees may also be forced to seek some other range for their cattle or purchase hay to feed them if conditions do not allow the cattle to graze elsewhere.

6. Wildlife

Impacts described under the proposed action would be avoided completely.

7. Threatened and Endangered Species

No listed plant or animals species are known or suspected in the area.

8. Recreation and Visual Resources

There would be no new impacts to dispersed recreation activities. Management objectives of VRM Class II and Class IV would be met.

9. Cultural Resources

There would be no impacts to cultural resources.

C. No Action

1. Vegetation

Continued authorization of livestock grazing within these pastures that burned would delay and in many instances precluded recovery of residual desirable perennial species with added impacts from cattle grazing.

2. Soils
Soils erosion would increase in the short term as a loss of vegetative cover.
Erosion rates would decrease as the species revegetate the site over a period of one or two years.
3. Air Quality
Air quality would not be affected.
4. Noxious Weeds
No noxious weeds would be introduced into these pastures.
5. Livestock grazing
Livestock would be allowed to continue to graze the burned areas and benefit from a flush of growth resulting from the release of nutrients and moisture for herbaceous growth in the short term.
6. Wildlife
The loss of shrub habitat would negatively impact big game and sagebrush dependant species.
7. Threatened and Endangered Species
No T & E species would be directly affected.
8. Recreation and Visual Resources
There would be a significant delay in returning the areas to an acceptable visual settings of some type of vegetation cover with structure similar to yhe natural setting.
9. Cultural Resources
Surface disturbance may be greater from livestock trampling and erosion factors without vegetation to provide surface stability.

Mitigation Measures and Residual Impacts

Mitigation measures would consist of cattle removal if upland utilization rates reach a maximum of 50%. At no time cattle allowed in the burned areas for two grazing seasons. If the electric fence fails and cattle get into the burned area, cattle must be removed immediately and the fence repaired. The grazing permittees are assigned the maintenance responsibilities for the temporary electric fences.

The following Bureau of Land Management personnel participated in the development and/or review of this EA.

Ron Rembowski – Rangeland Management Specialist (Project Coordinator)
Steve Christensen – Rangeland Management Specialist
Mitch Thomas – Rangeland Management Specialist
Jean Findley – Botanist/ACEC Coordinator
Al Bammann – Wildlife Biologist
Cynthia Tair – Fisheries Biologist
Shaney Rockefeller – Soils Specialist
Jon Westfall – Geologist
Diane Pritchard – Archeologist
Jon Freeman – Lands & Realty
Bob Alward – Recreation/Wilderness Specialist
Lynne Silva – Weeds Specialist
Tom Dabbs – Interdisciplinary Team Lead
Tom Hilken – Rangeland Management Specialist/NEPA Coordinator

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The Malheur Resource Area of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Vale District has analyzed a proposal for the construction of several temporary small gap fences in Black Butte Allotment and McEwen Allotment to protect pastures from grazing. The attached Environmental Assessment (EA 030-03-0010) contains a detailed description and analysis of two action alternatives and a no action alternative. This EA was prepared under the guidance provided by the Northern Malheur Management Framework Plan and Rangeland Program Summary, and the Proposed Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan and final EIS. The proposed action to build four temporary fences ranging in size from ½ mile to one mile in length, along the boundaries of the burned areas. Existing trails would be used for access. Materials would be transported to the site by ATV. No new road construction or blading of the fence line would be allowed.

The purposed project would be constructed prior to cattle turnout to exclude livestock grazing from fire impacted vegetation communities. The burned areas would be closed to livestock grazing through July 15, 2004, or until vegetation monitoring indicates that desired residual perennial vegetation has recovered to levels that are adequate to support and protect upland function.

Monitoring of the burned area would consist of livestock use supervision and vegetation monitoring.

In relation to context, the project's affected region is localized and the affects of implementation are limited to the area affected by the project. This is particularly true in light of mitigation measures adopted into the project specifications. In relation to intensity or severity, mitigation measures have been designed to protect public health and safety. Further, no unique characteristics are involved, there are no highly uncertain, unique or unknown risks, and the project does not set a precedent for future actions that could have

significant effects. This action also does not appear to be related to any other action that could be significant, there will be no impacts to the sites that could be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, no scientific, cultural or historic resources would be lost, and there will be no violation of any law or requirement protecting the environment. There will be no impacts to any species listed under the Endangered Species Act. There will be no irretrievable or irreversible commitment of resources as a result of the proposed action. I have determined, based upon the analysis of environmental impacts contained in the reference EA, and what is written above, that the potential impacts raised by the proposed project will not be significant and that the preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required.

The proposed action is to build four temporary fences ranging in size from ½ mile to one mile in length along the boundaries of the burned area.

s/Tom Hilken, Acting

March 12, 2003

Tom Dabbs
Field Manager
Malheur Resource Area

Date